

Bald Eagles

Nesting on Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge



A constant symbol of strength in a sea of change!

At Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, the bald eagle is a constant on an island that is always changing. Every winter, storms shift and change the Island. Meanwhile, eagles begin a new breeding season, the nest is repaired, eggs are laid and a new generation of bald eagles enters the world.

Every Eye on the Eagles

In **2003**, the new Herbert H. Bateman Educational Center was constructed. Refuge staff seized the opportunity to dedicate an entire exhibit to the National Symbol. An awe inspiring replica of a massive eagle's nest dominates the display. Beside it, a monitor shows live-video of a nest on Chincoteague Refuge so

that visitors and rangers alike can observe the eagle family.

Life on an Island of Change

On Labor Day weekend, **2006** Tropical Storm Ernesto tore through the Eastern Shore. The storm ripped down the eagle nest, but left the original eagle-cam in place. Undaunted, the eagles built their new nest in its current location and refuge staff erected a new camera!

Like clockwork...

With the new camera in place, visitors and staff have the unique opportunity to witness the day to day lives of bald eagles from December through May. The birds are quite punctual in their mating practices. Therefore, past years' events can give us a rough timeline of what to expect this year.

In **December, 2008** the eagles returned to the nest and started to add more branches and pine needles.

By the end of **January, 2009** the female had laid three eggs. They were laid on the 19th, 23rd and 25th.

By **February 26th** the waiting was over and the first egg had hatched. The second hatched on the 28th and it was determined that the first egg that was laid was not viable.

In **March** we watched the 2 new eaglets grow quickly. They were fed by both parents. Their diet was primarily fish, with an occasional duck or turtle.



In **April** both eaglets continued growing strong and stretching their wings in preparation for flight.

May was a triumphant month. The eaglets had grown considerably and fledged! Now accomplished fliers, the eagles continued to learn survival skills from their parents for the next few months.

In **November, 2009**, several Nor'easters left the eagle-cam damaged. At first the live feed was only interrupted, but then it stopped completely. Because of this, we do not know the exact dates the eggs were laid or when they hatched, but we do know that three eggs were laid and one eaglet fledged.

In **December, 2010** the eagle-cam was repaired so that staff and visitors could again enjoy observing the eagles at this exciting time.

We look forward to hearing your observations and watching this year's nesting progression.

Where can I see the nest on the refuge?

If you want to observe the nest in person, a leisurely stroll along the Wildlife Loop brings you to a terrific

bald eagle nest observation area. To the west of the Wildlife Loop near the entrance to Black Duck Trail a stand of trees hides the eagle family. From the trail use a camera, binoculars or just your eyes to see if you can spot the nest amongst the loblolly pine trees. Ask Refuge staff for details!



The Miracle of Life

It's hard to watch the nest without noticing similarities between bald eagles and traditional family life. Not only do bald eagles mate for life, 15-25 years, but their nests are like a continuous fixer upper. Every winter the couple prepares the nest for the mating season, by making repairs and additions. The nest size varies, but can be 6-10 feet in both diameter and height. Surprisingly, the nest cavity (where the eggs are laid) is a mere 12-16 inches in diameter and 4 inches deep.

Once the nest is an ideal nursery, the female will lay 1-3 eggs. They are dull white or pale blue in color and roughly the size of a goose egg. The adults share all of the responsibilities of parenting. They take turns sitting on the nest while the eggs incubate for 30-38 days. When the eggs hatch

each hatchling takes about 12-48 hours to break free. The eaglets use a small point on top of their beak to make their escape. This temporary tool is called an "egg tooth".

Another aspect of eagle parenthood which may seem familiar is that both parents care for and feed the young. With all of this attention, the eaglets grow quickly and reach the same size as their parents within 12 weeks. Just as our moms and dads show us how to survive, the eagle parents will teach their young how to fly and hunt.

A tradition threatened...

Though the upbringing of eagles can remind us of our own family lives, the eagle is also a symbol of courage, freedom and strength. Indeed in 1782 these qualities inspired the United States of America to name the bald eagle as the country's official symbol. At that time the bald eagle population was around 100,000. However, by 1963 the population had dropped to roughly 850 eagles.

In 1978 the bald eagle was placed on the Endangered Species List. Through tremendous conservation efforts spearheaded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the population had increased to roughly 20,000 and the bald eagle was delisted in 2007.

One site of recovery was Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge is a wonderful habitat for the bald eagle, because their primary food source, fish, is readily abundant. Eagles can also be spotted feasting on other refuge inhabitants such as ducks, egrets, rodents and snakes. Also, the refuge's tall loblolly pine trees are prime nesting habitat for the eagles.

Explore your nature, discover our legacy!

The bald eagle represents many things to many different people. In a chaotic world, these birds remind us of the stability that family can provide. Here on Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge, these birds seem to be immortals living on an island of change.



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